

Impacted Teeth or Impacted Services?

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Hello! My name is Kathryn Hannemann. I am the Director of The Harvey County Department on Aging. Harvey County is affiliated with the Central Plains Area Agency on Aging along with Sedgwick and Butler Counties under the direction of Annette Graham.

Before I came to work for the Department on Aging, I was employed by a homeless shelter to do fundraising. Upon being given the "grand tour" of the shelter, I was astonished to meet a homeless senior whom I will call "Mary." I think her story touched me more than any other.

"Mary's" husband abandoned her, leaving her with nothing. She was already poor, but now she was homeless. "Mary" was a younger senior and employable, except for the fact that she was toothless. She had applied for job after job with much encouragement from her new friends at the shelter even though her self-esteem had hit rock bottom.

The shelter thought that "Mary" had difficulty finding employment because she had no teeth which detracted from her appearance. A very kind donor saw to it that she was able to receive dentures. Wow! What a difference it made to her self-esteem and her marketability! "Mary" had a job within a week! The entire staff and all the clients celebrated this victory. Soon "Mary" was able to live independently, thanks to the kind donor and people around her who cared.

Not all seniors have this kind of success story. Dental services for the poor and uninsured in Kansas are reasons for

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those of us in human services to be concerned. Kansas is experiencing a shortage of providers.

Poor access to dental care can have a profound impact on health and well-being and lead to reduced productivity, and diminished physical and social function. Untreated dental problems cause pain, sleeplessness, and depression. A study done in 2002 revealed that there were 38 dentists per 100,000 people, and the number of dentists per capita continues to decline, especially in rural areas.

The Surgeon General reported that "a silent epidemic of oral disease is affecting our most vulnerable citizens - poor children, the elderly and many members of racial and ethnic minority groups. You cannot be healthy without oral health. Oral health and general health should not be interpreted as separate entities.... Associations between chronic oral infections and other health problems, including diabetes, heart disease, stroke and pre-term low birth-weight babies have been reported. The mouth is a window to the whole body."

What can we do for our seniors who have no dental coverage? What are the solutions? Here are a few suggestions:

- Enlist donated services of dentists in your area to establish a Mission of Mercy (KMOM), such as the recent one in Salina or Butler County's Mission of Mercy. On February 11th of this year, nine dentists in Butler County collaborated in a mini-version of KMOM to perform 359 procedures worth approximately \$43,728.

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These services and the celebration/recognition dinner all took place in one day! Thanks to the efforts of Connie Rausch and her Community Services Advisory Board, and, of course, the Department on Aging, the Resource Center for Independent Living, and the Salvation Army, the young and old underserved were served. (For more information about Butler County's Mission of Mercy, please contact the county's Department on Aging at 1-800-279-3655.)

- Contact the Harvey County Department on Aging at 1-800-750-7993 for information regarding The We Smile Mobile Preventive Oral Health Clinic to learn about the possibility of having a registered dental hygienist with an Extended Care Permit I or II from the Kansas Dental Board (along with several other credentials) bring mobile dental equipment to special sites outside of a dental office to conduct preventive oral care.**

Persons at adult care homes, hospital long-term care units, state institutions, or at the home of a homebound person who qualifies for the federal Home and Community Based Services are just some of those who are eligible for this service.

Maggie Smet, President of the Kansas Dental Hygienists' Association and resident of Harvey County, in cooperation with a local dentist (sponsor) and a long-term care administrator, provides preventive dental hygiene services to six area nursing homes. The services include cleaning, application of fluoride, dental hygiene instruction, and

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assessment of the patient's apparent need for further evaluation by a dentist.

Upon completion of the preventive services, Maggie advises the patient, the patient's legal guardian, and the sponsoring dentist of her findings and treatment. The patient or legal guardian are responsible for the work that follows.

The We Smile Mobile Preventive Oral Health Clinic has now served approximately 100 seniors in long-term care facilities.

More ideas for dental care for seniors are:

- Contact the Kansas Dental Association to learn about Senior Care, a program in which dental care is provided at reduced cost to eligible seniors (60 years or older who or not receiving federal, state or other dental health assistance). This program is income based. Call 1-800-432-3583 for more information.**
- Contact your local dental clinics, labs and universities to inquire about preventive services (dental hygienists - examinations, cleaning & x-rays) and dental work (dentists - fillings, extractions, etc.) for persons aged 60 and over. Engage your dentists in an opportunity to serve the underserved by agreeing to set up a sliding fee scale for seniors.**

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- **Contact Kansas Donated Dental Services (DDS) Program at 785-273-1900 for free or low-cost dental care to people (disabled, advanced age, medically challenged, low income) of all ages who lack adequate income or resources.**

Thank you for your time. I hope this information will be of assistance.

**Submitted by
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